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ZACK MAZER*

Welcome Speech to the Twenty-Third Annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening, and welcome to the 2005 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference. It is a privilege to stand here on behalf of my fellow co-directors and all of the people who have worked tirelessly for the past twelve months to put this event together.

This is the twenty-third annual incarnation of the conference, but it is the first conference of the next four years. Now I don't think it's any big secret why the number four is significant. Whether or not we agree with—or even believe in—the results of last November's election, we are facing four more years of an administration with a malevolent attitude toward our cause, toward our beliefs, and toward our vision for a better, cleaner, and healthier planet. The current administration has shown no hesitation to sacrifice the environment for the short-term gain of its financiers—timber companies, oil companies, coal companies, and car companies among them—and for the appearance of economic health. Using clever titles with terms like “healthy forest” and “clear skies,” this administration hides its giveaways from the public and points its finger at us when we oppose or even question its “initiatives.”

But we are also facing a public for whom our issues, for the most part, have become non-issues. If you watched all three

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presidential debates, and you blink on a regular basis, you may well have missed the scarce mentions of the “E” word—environment. I, for one, doubt this was by the candidates’ choice—they were merely hitting the issues that generate the most response from the electorate, and our issues are not among them.

Our issues have, to a great extent, been buried by the administration’s persistent fear-mongering, by the immediate mass hurt of a lagging economy, and by the mainstream media’s compliant catering to big-money interests and their wishes. When our issues do get play in the mass media, the coverage is often not positive. If you read the mainstream news, we are on many occasions portrayed as a roadblock to progress, development, and economic recovery.

We are here for the next three days to learn how we can change these things—through activism, through publicity, through lobbying, through litigation, and most importantly, through collaboration, for we will get nowhere if we go alone. You will find elements of this year’s agenda focused on every one of these areas, and many more, with the hope that we all—from students to seasoned activists and litigators—can get better at our respective roles, and gain skills and insights in new areas as well. Much of our agenda is also devoted to substantive ecological education about the problems and issues underlying our respective efforts as activists, publicists, lobbyists, and litigators. Our goal in organizing this conference is to ensure that whoever enters our event leaves as a better weapon for the environmental movement. I am confident that we will achieve our goal this year.

We strive, however, to do more than educate. We strive to inspire, and this again I believe we will achieve this year. You will find many events on our schedule devoted to the history of our movement—to its successes and failures, to the lessons those successes and failures can teach, and to how we can apply those lessons to our current projects. You will also find artistic displays of many types, and hikes through local parks to remind us of the beautiful world out there we’re trying to preserve, even while we’re mostly within these walls for the weekend. We hope that you will all leave not only better able to fight our fight, but with another year’s worth of energy to put into that fight.

I wish to say a few more words about collaboration. I firmly believe that there are as many worthy issues and perspectives as

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there are people in this room, and we will all be challenged this weekend with an issue or perspective different from our own. This is how we grow, as people and as environmentalists, and this may be the most inspirational feature of our weekend together. Our challenge is to accept these differences, and in them find more strength for our cause. There are some people out there with the idea that our movement is dead. And while I think their hearts are in the right place, the fact that we all are here is proof that they are wrong. But the fact that we all are here does not prove that we are a united voice—and in these times we can never be united enough. This weekend is our chance to forge new relationships between issues, groups, and individuals; to perhaps launch new and better groups to carry our flag forward; to share our tactics, ideas, and dreams; and also, to enjoy ourselves among friends. It was not that long ago that the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (E-LAW)—an organization whose impact has been felt across the globe—was conceived at this event. Somewhere in this crowd, I hope, is the next E-LAW.

With that I take my leave, and on behalf of Land Air Water, Friends of Land Air Water, and the University of Oregon, I welcome you all once again to the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference.

